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SOUTHERN AGRICULTURE, PLANTATION SYSTEM, AND THE NEGRO PROBLEM

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The Problem of the Negro is the Negro.—This is no mere truism. Rather, it is the proposition which has been the chief basis of disagreement between the North and South with respect to the negro. The North has assumed the negro's degradation and lack of progress as due to the repression of his social environment. The South has emphatically asserted that the negro is the source of his own misfortunes.

That Southern institutions are repressive in their influence will be shown in the following pages. On the whole, however, the negro is the cause of the institutions, which in turn react upon his condition.

I wish to confine this article in substance to a brief statement of the relation of Southern agriculture to the negro problem. I may be pardoned, however, for prefacing this statement with a brief summary of those peculiarities of negro psychology which most intimately condition his economic reactions, even at the risk of some reiteration.

The negro is a good cotton "hand"; that is, he can perform the large amount of purely mechanical labor which that crop demands. Possessed of great endurance, especially with respect to exposure to heat and malaria, with a low standard of living, and willing to supplement his own labor with that of his wife and children, it is probable that, under effective supervision, he can more than hold his own.

Moreover, the average Southern negro farmer knows how to "make cotton"; is familiar with the routine methods generally followed in his district. In spite of this, the average negro farmer is a pitiful failure when not subject to white supervision. In the vast majority of cases his farm is apt to become a weed patch. This, because the negro lacks two essential economic qualities. He is generally incapable of steady and purposeful labor when left alone,

and he is equally lacking in judgment. Added to this is his normal thriftlessness which prevents him from accumulating the necessary equipment.

This is the significance of the Black Belt. It has been several times pointed out that the negroes in the Black Belt are noticeably more immoral, more thriftless and generally more irresponsible than those who reside in localities less entirely inhabited by negroes, as, for instance, the cheap pine lands of Texas, Louisiana and Arkansas. This difference would be obvious to the most casual observer traveling in the South. It is confirmed likewise by statistics of illiteracy and per capita wealth.¹ Freed from the powerful social coercion of a negro environment, the negroes outside of the Black Belt are also less numerous relatively to the white population, and thus subjected to the influential stimulus of white example, which is especially beneficial in the field of family relations.

The contrast is not so marked, however, in the economic life of the two regions. The isolated negro family in the regions of poor land frequently has the advantage of land ownership, and this, together with the absence of a negro social environment, makes for a greater thrift. The very slight superiority in this respect is more than offset by the loss from lack of the white supervision, by which negro agriculture is so greatly benefited under the regime of plantation organization. Indeed, the negro's lack of economic qualities is the *raison d'être* of the Southern plantation system, which is the most important economic institution connected with the negro problem.

The industrial superiority of the plantation system has been conclusively demonstrated by the sure test of economic survival. In the early decades of the nineteenth century, when the tide of immigration was moving westward, the plantation system supplanted the primitive economy of the squatter farmers who were its forerunners. This process was a continuous one in the ante-bellum period. The small farming class on the superior cotton lands became fewer, while the planting economy increased its industrial dominance.² Likewise, in the reorganization since the war, the plantation system has become

¹ Bulletin 8 of the *Permanent Census*, "Negroes in the United States," pp. 95-98. Vide especially R. P. Brooks, "A Local Study of the Race Problem," *Political Science Quarterly*, June, 1911.

² U. B. Phillips, "The Origin and Growth of the Southern Black Belts," in *American Historical Review*, July, 1906.

an important system of agricultural organization, especially in the best cotton lands.

Since the abolition of slavery destroyed an important criterion, it is not easy to define the post-bellum plantation system. The name plantation is employed very loosely. In its broadest sense, it is used to signify any large land holding operated with any degree of unity. The limits of this article do not permit a detailed description of the many varieties of the so-called plantation system nor of the special features of plantation organization. In the sugar region the plantation is frequently a highly organized business with a half million dollars invested in agriculture and possessing the elaborate organization of a great factory.

At the other extreme is the cotton plantation worked by tenants who rent the land and receive the occasional advice of the landlord or merchant. The tenant keeps his own stock and to a large extent runs the place to suit himself. So loose is the organization that it is doubtful whether the name "plantation" should be applied to it. Between these extremes there are many variations with respect to closeness of supervision and of organization, as well as in size.

The prerequisite of large scale industry in agriculture, and, therefore, of the plantation system, is a stable labor supply. Before the war, this was secured by the institution of slavery. Immediately after the war various forms of tenancy as well as wage labor appear to have been resorted to.³ The latter arrangement has proven generally unsatisfactory for plantation organization, because the laborer has no financial interest in the outcome of his labor. Consequently, he may quit his work at the most critical time. Moreover, he must be closely watched during every hour of his labor to prevent shirking. At present, the plantation system based primarily on hired labor is of little importance outside of the sugar region.⁴

It is to be noted, however, that as agricultural methods become more intensive, the tendency toward hired labor is greater because

³The industrial history of the first twenty years after the war is extremely obscure, especially as there are no census statistics of tenancy until 1880. No adequate monograph exists on the subject, although one or two studies have been made of post-bellum reorganization for particular states; notably A. E. Cance, *Tenancy in Mississippi*, and E. M. Banks, *Land Tenure in Georgia*.

⁴To judge the importance of hired labor as the basis of the plantation system from the census statistics of agricultural laborers would result in a tremendous exaggeration; for the census figures include women, and children over ten years of age, as well as casual laborers working in harvest and laborers outside of the plantation belts.

the cost of supervision becomes relatively smaller. There are indications that this tendency is increasing at the present time in the South.

On account of the drawbacks of the labor system, tenancy has become the standard method of employing negro labor. It insures a deeper interest in the crop and economizes supervision. It likewise transfers a portion of the risk to the tenant. In the South tenancy has assumed several characteristic forms which must be described briefly to make clear the relation of the present industrial organization of Southern agriculture to the negro problem. Confining ourselves to the most important forms, and omitting the limited sugar and rice regions, three important tenant systems may be distinguished.

In the cash or standing rent system the negro pays a fixed amount of cotton lint per acre or per farm. In the eastern part of the cotton belt, and sporadically in the western part, this system is known as "renting." It is almost invariably characterized by very loose methods of supervision and organization. The landlord has little interest in the result of the crop or the efficiency of the methods employed, provided the rent is paid. He is generally an absentee and is not represented by a resident manager.

There are two principal forms of share tenancy. In the first, the landlord furnishes all the expenses of making the crop except the labor, both parties sharing equally in the crop. This is popularly known as "cropping." In the second form the landlord furnishes the land; and the tenant provides the labor, mules and implements. The landlord receives as rent one-third of the corn and one-fourth of the cotton. There are other minor variations of this system. Geographically, the cropping system is prevalent in all parts of the South. The third and fourth system, however, exists chiefly west of the Mississippi. Usually the cropping system is characterized by exceedingly close supervision and organization, because the planter has risked mules and implements as well as land in the negro's care and has a large interest in the outcome. Therefore, the cropping system, especially in the western South, is prominent in the rich alluvial bottoms and other regions of superior cotton lands.

The third and fourth system is normally a much looser form of organization than the cropping system. Sometimes where the third

and fourth renter is on the better lands, he is almost as closely supervised as is the cropper, but normally the third and fourth system are most prominent in those poor lands which do not demand close plantation organization.

The prevalence of the cropping system on the better lands is to be explained by several facts. In the first place, these superior cotton lands, with the exception of the Texas Black Prairie, were the seats of the ante-bellum plantation system. Since the negro has largely remained in the old situs, the natural connection between the plantation system and the necessity for supervising negro labor finds expression here. Again, economic forces have heretofore made a one-crop system most profitable on the best cotton lands of the South. Normally, the plantation system has proven itself best adapted to the production of one main market crop. It is obvious, too, that the greater value of the superior lands places a premium upon the more efficient supervision. In many parts of the South, particularly in the Southwest, these superior lands consist of river bottoms where the difficulties of coping with floods and the greater abundance of weeds and noxious insects place an additional premium on good management, while at the same time the prevalence of malaria forces a reliance on negro labor.

The merits of the plantation system must be estimated in terms of two all-important considerations: First, in its relation to social production and its efficacy in producing temporary social and economic order in a population of the lowest industrial capacity; second, in its relation to the welfare of the negro and the ultimate promotion of negro progress.

It is apparent that the plantation system, judged from the point of view of social production merits considerable approbation. It has been the means whereby the negro has been made a serviceable factor in Southern industry. This accomplishment must be reckoned an important offset to the disadvantages of the system.

It is easy, however, to overestimate the importance of the plantation system as a bulwark of Southern agricultural organization. In the above analysis of the several systems of tenancy, it was pointed out that only one of the three forms, the so-called cropping system, implies a sufficiently close industrial organization to merit this approbation. The relative importance of this system to the other forms cannot be stated with precision until the publica-

tion of the Thirteenth Census. It may be said with confidence, however, that it comprises a relatively small proportion of the entire industry carried on by negro labor in the South.

Before proceeding to estimate the relation of the plantation system to negro progress, it is necessary to refer briefly to another factor which is intimately connected with all the forms of agricultural organization—the credit system. The plantation system as a form of coherent industrial organization is limited in extent; but the credit system is co-extensive with negro agriculture. The negro who owns clear title to his industrial equipment or possesses enough capital to furnish provisions throughout the year is exceptional.

There are three main sources from which the negro secures these necessities on credit—the plantation owner, the merchant and the bank. Generally speaking, the landlord credit is most prominent in the region of close plantation organization; the merchant credit in those districts of absentee landlordism and absence of close organization. The bank is a comparatively unimportant source of credit to the negro farmer. It is, however, becoming increasingly important. Attracted into the field by high rates of interest, the influence of the banker's competition is in the direction of lowering and standardizing the terms of credit transactions. Most such loans are on security of chattels and crop liens, frequently with a waiver of the landlord's lien. As yet, they are confined to the more responsible class of tenants.

The credit system has been so closely associated with the plantation system in the South that it has sometimes been forgotten that they are two separate institutions. The latter, we have seen, has no small social utility. On the other hand, the only justification of the credit system has been that no better arrangement has been developed for the performance of a very necessary function. The general defects of the credit system have been pointed out so frequently that it is not necessary to enter into a full description of its method of operation. The most vicious aspects of the system are due to the negro himself. The negro is so thrifless that he prefers to borrow rather than to accumulate enough for his living expenses while making his crop. He is so ignorant and so careless of consequences that he will accept almost any terms. The same ignorance prevents him from keeping any account of the advances, although this is partly due to the fact that in case of discrepancy the lender's

account will prevail. Very generally also the planter markets the tenant's crop—almost invariably so under the cropping system—and the tenant is equally helpless to determine the justice of the final settlement.

The inevitable result is exploitation of the sheerest type; high prices for supplies, high interest charges, sometimes falsification of accounts. There is no doubt that such exploitation is very general throughout the South. It does not, as a rule, violate the letter of common honesty, as, for instance, by the falsification of accounts. More often it is merely the advantage which the very strong takes of the very helpless. Not infrequently it is tempered by moderation. The situation was picturesquely expressed by a negro man in the Brazos Valley in Texas, whom I was questioning. "Boss," said he, "some cuts de nigger too close to de bone, but dey all gash him a little." Then he supplemented his statement by the doggerel which has become almost commonplace:

"Naught is a naught
And a figger's a figger;
All fur de white man,
And naught for de nigger."

The credit system has been the basis of the so-called peonage which has been practiced in the South. The negro has no property which can serve as security for a debt. At the same time he must be advanced the necessary means of livelihood while making the crop. The lender has only one way of collecting the debt—by compelling the negro to work it out. This, however, is illegal under the thirteenth amendment, which forbids involuntary servitude except for crime.

The latter exception has been variously employed by Southern legislatures as a means of escaping the operation of the amendment. The Alabama law, for instance, made it a criminal offense for a negro to accept advances, under contract to work, and then violate that contract, on the ground that it is obtaining money under false pretenses. This law was declared unconstitutional last year in a decision of the Supreme Court of the United States on the ground that it is a mere subterfuge by means of which the constitutional provision is evaded. Typical peonage laws of another sort found in a number of Southern states provide that any planter who employs a negro indebted to another planter, becomes responsible

for the debt. Although there is less practice of peonage now than a few years ago, the present methods of coercion are more subtle and more difficult of conviction. Usually negroes are so densely ignorant that they know little of their rights under the law. There are thousands who have no idea how to obtain legal redress. It is easy to impose on such credulity to effect a practically coerced service. The mere moral prestige of the white and the fear of physical violence, rarely employed, but always a potentiality, are often sufficient.

Yet, evil as it is, peonage has been the outgrowth of a felt need; viz., a credit system by which the negro tenant may be furnished credit with a minimum of risk. The vicious system which forces the negro to hypothecate his labor to obtain credit results inevitably in divorcing the planter's interest from those of his tenant. The negro is retained chiefly by keeping him in debt. Not only does this intensify the tendency to petty exploitation, but negro thrift becomes contrary to the planter's interest. To encourage a negro to make his garden or "raise his meat" lessens his dependence on his master's store or commissary. If, moreover, the negro is caught stealing or "shooting craps," the master pays the fine and adds it to the negro's debt. In this way his hold over the laborer is strengthened. The natural result is a complaisant tolerance on the master's part toward such petty crimes as do not seriously injure himself. Thus the credit system has operated to intensify a tendency toward racial separation already growing rapidly.

In judging, therefore, of the merits of the two foremost industrial institutions, the plantation system and the credit system, it appears fairly certain that the latter, not the former, is chiefly responsible for the principal evils. There is a great need for the reform of the credit system. Divorced of its connection with this, the plantation system may be regarded as neither a great good nor a great evil. Its chief service has been in the field of production. It offers little or nothing to the solution of the negro problem. It is not conducive to negro progress ethically or economically. The establishment of social and industrial order was an important service, but the time has passed when we can afford to be content with a mere preservation of the *status quo*.

Nor will mere change in the negro's industrial condition be adequate. If every negro family in the South could be given the

ownership of a farm, it would not result in a permanent solution of the negro problem. With the present habits of inefficiency and thriftlessness, the negro could not retain the position thus artificially achieved against the force of modern competition.

On the other hand, the problem is more than educational. The impression prevails in the South that the ordinary form of education is worse than wasted. Even the industrial education promoted by Booker T. Washington and others is not to be regarded as a cure-all, although undoubtedly a means of uplift. The ethical basis of negro life must be profoundly changed before much can be hoped for. It is necessary to create for the negro a family life; to develop sentiments and motives which shall result in a social conscience in the race itself. It is hopeless to expect economic stability and thrift in a race whose family ties are temporary and based chiefly on animalism.

The negro's religion is the greatest obstacle to his ethical progress. It satisfies largely the craving for emotional excitement, with little emphasis on standards of conduct. The negro preacher, as a type, is an adept at arousing emotion, and very frequently a libertine and a scoundrel. It is the prevailing opinion in all sections of the South from which I have obtained information on the subject, that the negro preacher very frequently employs the prestige of his position as a means of gratifying his baser passions.

It remains to point out, not the means of solving the negro problem, but the method of approach. This huge protean shadow with which the old order grappled does not possess the same sinister menace for the new; for the negro problem is losing its sectional character and is becoming national in the sense of uniting the interests of both sections in its solution.

Among the causes of this should be mentioned the increasing social and industrial integration of the nation and the increased stream of negro migration to the North. Most influential of all is the increasing realization of the South that its industrial prosperity is largely dependent upon a progressive solution of the negro problem. Southern prosperity must depend on an extensive immigration of Northern capital and Northern industrial experience, which has heretofore been deterred by the peculiar institutions of the South.

In readjusting our point of view, it will be recognized that no

key can be found in the *egalitarian* philosophy of the eighteenth century; in the splendid idealism, which attempted to clothe a savage in the outward garb of civilization and citizenship, under the assumption that he was only prevented from rising to the full stature of the Anglo-Saxon by the repression of his environment.

The war freed the negro from the repressive influence of slavery. It also deprived him of the guidance and support for which he had looked to his master. Brought suddenly face to face with a high civilization, the resulting adjustment has been inadequate. Far better for all concerned had the negro's bondage been modified gradually. As it is, the problem must be approached under the hampering obstacles imposed by utterly impractical legislation. Worse still, it is impossible to rely on the close and friendly paternalistic relation which formerly united master and slave.

The question of social equality should be eliminated for the present. It is an absolute impossibility in the Southern States, whatever its ultimate desirability. This question has been settled in the far South with a finality that brooks no questioning. The negro accepts the relation as a matter of course. It is in the border states where the issue has not been so decisively settled that the real friction exists.

The most casual observer must admit that the policy as applied in the South has been an unusually effective method of controlling a race that would too easily drift into crime and license. A mighty change, however, must be wrought in the Southern point of view. It is necessary to undo the evil work of fifty years. The South must develop a greater sense of social responsibility with respect to the negro.

Only at one point is there a social consciousness in the South concerning the negro problem, and the essence of that consciousness is repression: "Keep the negro in his place." There is too little desire to deal with the problem in the spirit of improving the negro and making him a better citizen. Indeed, this spirit is impossible so long as the present separation between the races exists. To educate a possible foe is to place in his hands a keen-edged sword. Until the ground is cleared of such obstacles, it is difficult to accomplish practical programs of reform.

That these obstacles appear to be removing themselves is ground for the hope that the negro problem is not impossible of solution.